

THE CONDUCT OF TOWN OR PARISH MEETINGS

1. In Parish or Town Meetings parishes and towns have a unique statutory democratic institution, capable, if rightly and interestingly organised, of strengthening the influence of the council both inside the parish or town itself and in its dealings with other authorities, with government departments and with the Local Government Boundary Commission. In addition it can be used to evoke public interest in local government generally and so to overcome some of that apathy of which so much is heard-
2. Whilst it has been said that attendance at such meetings is often habitually low or non-existent, the National Association of Local Councils often knows of many cases where a high or at least a creditable attendance is normal year after year. These "good meetings" are often oases in the middle of a desert of "bad" ones.
3. This leaflet is mainly concerned with the Annual Assembly, but paragraphs 5-9 and 12 apply to any Assembly of a Meeting. Its object is to suggest to those responsible ways of attracting larger attendances. It is based entirely on information kindly supplied by clerks and chairmen who have been successful.

Law

4. Under the Local Government Act, 1972, the Annual Assembly must take place between 1st March and 1st June (both inclusive) in each year, and may not commence before 6 p.m.
5. All parish or town electors are entitled to speak and vote, and under The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act, 1960, the general public and the press may attend. To avoid confusion on voting it is important to separate the electors clearly from the ordinary public.
6. The Town Mayor or Chairman of the Parish Councillor in his absence the Vice-Chairman or Deputy Mayor must preside if present; if not the meeting may appoint a chairman for the time being. Where parishes are grouped under a common council each meeting, subject to any provision in the grouping order, chooses its own chairman.
7. At least seven clear days' public notice must be given, but if the agenda is to include any of the following items fourteen days' notice must be given:-
 - (a) Dissolution of the Parish Council. (Possible where there are fewer than 151 electors.)

- (b) Grouping the Parish with another Parish.
At least one notice must be displayed in a conspicuous place in the town or parish.
- 8. The notice must specify the business to be done and must be signed by the conveners. The Town Mayor, the Chairman or two parish or town councillors or six electors may act as conveners.
- 9. The expenses are paid by the parish or town council.
- 10. A few resolutions of a town or parish meeting are necessary to or binding on the town or parish council. These are as follows:-
 - (a) A resolution by a well attended meeting requiring the council to provide allotments places upon it an obligation to do so.
 - (b) Where a trust instrument requires a resolution of the parish meeting for some act of the council as trustee.
- 11. Under the Charities Act, 1960, the accounts of parochial charities other than those for the relief of poverty *must* be laid by the council before the parish or town meeting.
- 12. No method of voting **at the meeting** is laid down and therefore any convenient method may be used, but a poll (i.e. a vote of the whole body of electors by ballot) may be claimed before the end of the meeting and must be held if demanded by **ten persons present**, or one-third of those present (whichever is the less), or if the chairman consents.
The poll is conducted by a returning officer appointed by the Borough or District Council.

General Considerations

- 13. (a) It is useless to publicize a meeting where there is nothing to discuss, or to organise an interesting meeting without proper publicity .
- (b) The object should be to make the meeting a social as well as a formal occasion and make people feel that they are important in their village or town.

Agendas

- 14. It is generally agreed that it is important to frame the agenda so that everyone who has some public standing in the locality should have an appointed time when he can tell the meeting what he is doing. CWaC Councillors should be given the chance to speak; there should be a report on the activities of the parish or town council; the trustees of the charities should be

given their opportunity and so can representatives of such bodies as the village hall committee, the Women's Institute and the sports and other clubs. This is an excellent opportunity for them to make their mark and their friends will be glad to support them.

One further advantage of this is that it makes co-operation with the local voluntary bodies automatic. and obtains their assistance in the publicity. A non-electors may always speak during a meeting with its consent. This should be treated as having been given if there is no objection. On the controversial topics it may be desirable formally to adjourn the meeting for non-electors .speeches so as to indicate clearly who is speaking as an elector and who as a guest.

15. Accounts which are put before the meeting should be topical. It is better to exhibit recent unaudited accounts than to produce audited statements which are nearly always a year old and therefore irrelevant to much likely to be said at the meeting.
16. In some parishes outside speakers are invited. These can be local government officials or experts on matters likely to be of local interest.
17. It is useful to place on the agenda a particular local public issue which is important or controversial; there are more of these than are sometimes suspected, e.g. a village plan; planting trees on the green; the approach of a motorway; more houses; water or sewerage schemes; the amalgamation of charities; telephone kiosks and post-offices; bus and train services; commons; clearing the churchyard.
On the other hand it is perhaps wise to restrict the number of these to be raised at anyone meeting.

Publicity

18. It is often useful to issue a preliminary notice about three weeks in advance, inviting the public to send in resolutions or subjects which they wish to discuss.
19. Apart from the largely inadequate statutory publicity, many councils give a very wide circulation to their parish meeting notices. These include:-

- (a) **Press publicity.** It is better to get the local press to use the agenda as a news item appearing in the columns which people read rather than to insert advertisements in official columns which are mostly ignored.
- (b) **Invitations.** In some parishes the agenda is framed as part of an invitation and a copy delivered to each household by volunteers. This works very well.
- (c) **Parish Magazines.** Articles on local council affairs and notices of meetings can be put in parish magazines which are often glad of the material.
- (d) **Parish Fixture Bulletins.** Where there is a parish bulletin of future events it is an obvious vehicle for this type of notice.
- (e) **Notices.** In many cases shopkeepers and publicans have been induced to put up notices in windows and bars. ,
- (f) **Oral Announcement.** Loudspeaker vans have been used, and in a few cases someone has acted as village crier.
- (g) **Special invitations** are often sent to each voluntary association.
- (h) **Annual Reports.** Some local councils produce and circulate a formal annual report, which is sometimes printed.

- 20. Posters should be large and legible, and their design gives considerable scope for originality .Schoolchildren can sometimes be given much pleasure painting them. They need not be stereotyped.
- 21. One parish council always refers to its parish meeting as "The Village Conference".

Arrangements at the Hall

- 22. Reasonable refreshments can, and should, be provided by the council.
- 23. It is a mistake to arrange the seating in straight rows parallel to and facing a stage. Those in front cannot see those behind; those behind see only the platform and the back of the heads of those in front; and those at the back of the hall usually have only a very imperfect vision and understanding of proceedings. It is better to arrange the chairs in a deep horseshoe or rectangle (as in the House of Commons) so that everyone can see the face of at least half the meeting and recognise the speakers.
- 24. Depression is apt to set in if a small meeting is held in a very large hall. While the object is to fill the very large hall, it is undoubtedly helpful to be able to screen off the empty part of a hall where necessary.

25. Stewards are desirable if a large meeting is expected. They can be allotted blocks of seats for vote counting.
26. The stewards should try to persuade people to fill up the front rows first, Otherwise late-comers invariably interrupt the proceedings by having to find seats at the front.
27. Tables and agendas should be provided for the press.

Conduct of the Meeting

28. The meeting ought to be as informal as is consistent with order.
29. There is much to be said for allowing any subject (except those mentioned above in paragraphs 7 and 10) to be raised informally. but the electors should be encouraged to give some written notice of their intention to do so even if only by a scribbled note to the chairman during the meeting. If a matter has not been specified on the public notice no formally binding decision can be taken on it.
30. The following comment on a very successful parish meeting in Sussex deserves repetition: "The writer happened to be present ...and in his view it was largely because of the efficient manner in which the meeting was handled, the way that speakers were held to the point and brevity insisted on, that people left the meeting interested and stimulated and prepared to come again."

*Issued by the National Association of Local Councils.
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